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Attorney General Bell Departs

GRiffin BELL just seems to invite bum raps. His resignation as attorney general was accepted by President Carter during the Cabinet firings, leaving the impression that Judge Bell, too, was on the hit list. This was untrue. The attorney general has wanted to go home for a long time.

It was, however, no worse a bum rap than he took when he was nominated. His critics said then that he was a country-club racist and a Carter crony who would politicize the Department of Justice. In his 2½ years in Washington, Judge Bell has emphatically shown himself to be neither. Instead, he has been one of the best of the people who came to town with the president.

History may not record Griffin Bell as having been the best attorney general of all time—the extravagant prediction President Carter made when he announced the nomination. But it will rank him as among the better attorneys general and certainly among the most widely liked. Not often does a departing Cabinet officer hear public apologies from his former critics, as Judge Bell has in recent days.

Part of this, no doubt, was due to the grace and wit with which Judge Bell presided over the Department of Justice and dealt with his critics. But mainly the reputation with which he leaves Washington came from the high standards of justice and integrity on which he insisted. The Department of Justice was at a

turning point when he took charge. His predecessor, Edward H. Levi, had started to pull it from the mire into which it had sunk during the Nixon administration. But the strides Mr. Levi had made toward restoring professionalism, eliminating political favoritism, and redirecting the course of the FBI were still vulnerable to being reversed.

Judge Bell carried on the work Mr. Levi had started. As a result, the department is in better shape now than it has been in more than a decade, an impressive list of new federal judges has been compiled, William Webster is off to a good start as the new FBI director, and political influence on legal decisions seems to be at a minimum. Even when close associates of the president, like Bert Lance and Billy Carter, have been involved in questionable activities, no one has been able to establish the existence of any outside interference with the department's normal handling of such matters.

Perhaps the best evidence of that is the ease with which the nomination of Benjamin R. Civiletti slid through the Senate. Mr. Civiletti has been Judge Bell's deputy and was his hand-picked successor. Almost no one could find anything critical to say of Mr. Civiletti or of the department in which he has been a major figure. The only senatorial advice to him was to keep running the place just the way Judge Bell has run it. That was good advice.